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# Water cleanup under fire

County's slow action lets corporations get away with pollution, panel says

By RICK McLAUGHLIN  
Staff Writer

RIVERSIDE — A task force blasted officials of San Bernardino County and several large corporations Tuesday for alleged foot dragging on efforts to clean up contaminated groundwater beneath Colton and Rialto.

In addition, the Inland Empire Perchlorate Task Force accused the county at a Tuesday press conference in Riverside of legally letting the previous own-

ers off the hook for the perchlorate contamination of the more than 95 acres near Highland and Sierra avenues.

The land is part of several parcels considered to be the source of the groundwater contamination that has closed 20 area wells, seven of which are in Fontana.

Barry C. Groveman, task force attorney and chairman, said San Bernardino County and corporations such as B.F. Goodrich, Kwikset and others are not cooperating because "they don't want to accept and face

legal liability."

"It would be nice to say we are getting cooperation and are making progress," the Los Angeles-based Groveman said, "but we are getting no cooperation. They won't recognize the task force. They are ignoring or not responding to letters."

The ad hoc task force, made up of agencies and municipalities, was recently formed by state Sen. Neil Soto, D-Ontario, to identify the sources of perchlorate

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contamination in local drinking water supplies, especially in the West San Bernardino Valley.

Water agencies in the Fontana, Colton and Rialto areas have discovered the chemical, an ingredient in solid rocket fuel, in some of their wells.

San Bernardino County's Mid-Valley Landfill, a part of the suspect land area, has about 16 World War II-era ammunition bunkers that have tested positive for perchlorate, which is considered hazardous particularly to children and pregnant women.

The property also included an ammonium-nitrate mixing plant.

"At the time of World War II, the property was owned by West Coast Landing, a division of Kwikset. During the Korean War, B.F. Goodrich bought West Coast Landing and operated on the property," Groveman said.

Other munition and explosives manufacturers and operators have used the property under various names, he said.

Groveman said documents show the county purchased the 95-acre property in 1993 for \$5 million.

He said the purchase included a provision that the county agrees to release the sellers from

liability suffered from hazardous or toxic substances discovered on the property after the county bought it.

"What could they be thinking?" he said. "They may have acquired a lot of liability."

At the same time, he accused the county of not starting any tests for contamination until 1997.

Fred Aguiar, chairman of the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors, took exception to the charges leveled by Groveman and other task force members.

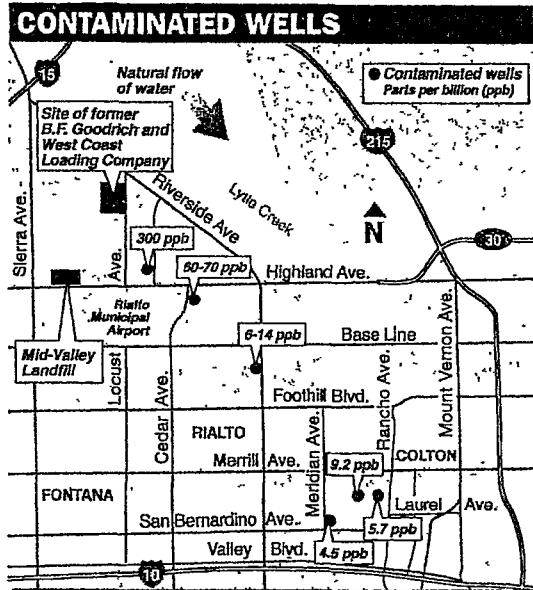
"I'm not going to get into a war of words with an overpriced attorney whose authority is dubious in the first place," Aguiar said. "I have no idea what they are talking about, and obviously he (Groveman) doesn't know what he is talking about."

"We are ahead of schedule with a plan we submitted about two weeks ago. We put a plan together and did it expeditiously."

But Groveman said the plan to install six monitoring wells was done too quickly and was "designed for public relations purposes."

Aguiar said the county sent the plan to the state water quality control board, and it was approved.

"They can't have it both ways," he said. "We can't be



Source: California Regional Water Quality Control Board

Staff graphic

dragging our feet and going too fast with our plan on the other hand."

Aguiar said if the county is found to be responsible, "then we will do something about it."

In the meantime, he will wait for a hearing scheduled Sept. 6 with the Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board, which he said is satisfied with the county's efforts.

The 95-acre landfill expan-

sion is part of a 1,200-acre, 2-square-mile area that has had numerous owners and has tested positive for perchlorate.

The underground chemical plume has moved south from the site near Sierra and Highland avenues from one to three inches a day for as much as a half century.

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## County gets blame for fuel-tainted wells

RIALTO: A state task force says officials should have known about the site's contamination.

By CHRIS BOWMAN  
SCRIPPS-McCLATCHY  
WESTERN SERVICE

A task force of state regulators and water suppliers blamed San Bernardino County officials Wednesday for the rapid spread of a rocket-fuel chemical that has polluted wells serving 500,000 people.

The group provided records showing county officials knew the property it bought to expand its Mid-Valley Landfill in Rialto had been used to store explosives containing perchlorate, a chemical linked to thyroid disorders.

San Bernardino County offi-

cials denied Wednesday that the county knew about the contamination when the property was bought in 1993.

San Bernardino County failed to properly investigate contamination on the site, said Barry Groveman, an attorney for local water suppliers and chairman of the Perchlorate Task Force.

"The evidence suggests the landfill may be a major source of the well pollution," Groveman said. "The site was occupied by a virtual Who's Who of explosives manufacturers that used perchlorate."

The task force investigation led state toxics enforcers on Monday to issue the county an order to investigate pollution on the 100-acre site.

A Rialto official said the city

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## WELLS

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also is beginning to look at county officials' role in the problem.

"We believe the evidence is starting to mount and point to them as having some responsibility for this," said Brad Baxter, Rialto's public works director.

The county this year has conducted more than \$1 million worth of soil and water tests to determine whether the landfill is contributing to the growing underground plume of perchlorate. Four businesses also have been named as potentially responsible.

Since 1997, the plume has caused water suppliers to close

18 of the 40 wells that provide the bulk of the drinking water for the 500,000 residents of Rialto, Fontana, Colton and surrounding unincorporated communities of western San Bernardino County.

The level of contamination and speed of its spread has increased dramatically in the past 18 months, migrating one to three feet a day, Baxter said.

Water purveyors in western San Bernardino County are especially worried because the region is in a severe drought making it difficult to find replacement water.

Further, suppliers say they have no idea how much worse the pollution will get because the investigation by the county and other potentially responsible parties has only just begun.